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The Emotional Cost of Academic Capitalism: Emotional Labor and Professional Alienation among Early-Career Academics in Shenzhen

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Abstract

This study examines the psychological and structural impacts of academic capitalism on early-career academics (ECAs) within the rapidly modernizing higher education of Shenzhen, China. While the city's aggressive expansion of tertiary education has successfully accelerated its global university rankings, it has simultaneously institutionalized a highly quantified framework characterized by strict "up-or-out" tenure-track contracts and rigorous Key Performance Indicators (KPIs). Utilizing a qualitative research design, this study conducted in-depth, semi-structured interviews with twenty-four junior faculty members and post-doctoral fellows across eight higher education institutions in Shenzhen.

The findings reveal that these hyper-quantified accountability cultures compel ECAs to perform strategic compliance, suppressing negative emotions like anxiety and exhaustion to project institutional alignment through continuous surface acting. Furthermore, intense pressure to meet publication quotas forces a distinct estrangement from the scholarly product, driving researchers to pursue formulaic studies rather than long-term research. This hyper-competitive environment fosters a culture of defensive individualism, transforming peers into direct competitors and devaluing pedagogical responsibilities like teaching and mentorship. Ultimately, this study argues that academic modernization treats emotional expression as a commodified institutional resource, accelerating professional alienation. These dynamics pose serious long-term risks to the higher education ecosystem by cultivating a utilitarian academic culture and undermining teaching quality.

Keywords: Academic pressure; Defensive individualism; Key Performance Indicators; Up-or-Out